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Will the real La Habana please stand up?

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By **CHRISTA MORLETTI McINTYRE**

Cuba is a magical and mysterious little island whose long sweet roots have nurtured a folk tradition that frames the art of the Southern continent as it inspires heated debate to the north. Before the man with the famous untidy beard and army-green patrol cap took to the Sierra Maestra mountains and became *El Comandante Castro*, La Habana – Havana – was full of the sounds of swinging band leaders like Beny Moré, sugar cane plantations dripping barrels full of rum, poker chips flooding velvet-lined tables, sophisticated and statuesque women dancing a *pachanga* for foreign guests. In the stacked and colorful homes lining the narrow streets of La Habana ran the lifeblood of the city, the everyday people, the families, the little heroes moving in and out of the daily the commerce of the 770-mile-long island.



Just a cozy little family scene in old Havana. Photo: Russell J Young

Contigo Pan y Cebolla (a phrase akin to “through good times and bad”), the new show at [Milagro Theatre](#), is a dear postcard from the past, written by Héctor Quintero Viera about his family life in the mid to late 1950s. Furthering the flavor of its time and place, the play is acted in Spanish, with easy-to-follow English supertitles, which have been cleverly disguised as picture frames.

Fefa (Amalia Alarcón Morris) has an over-pinned silver wig and shuffles onstage with the hesitation of the older woman of the house. Her heart is failing and she cannot be exposed to any intense situations, but her console radio is always dialed into her daily shows, the ancestral dramas of future television soap operas. Fefa was taken in by her nephew Anselmo’s family, the Prietos. Anselmo (Roberto Astorga) is a middle-aged, clean-headed man who, as sole support of the household, works in a textile factory owned by Polish political exiles. Veronika Nuñez is Lala, Anselmo’s wife. An exacting and demanding presence in the Prieto home, Lala’s always making plans for plans, pushing her children into a better future. While her clan is treading water, Lala is keeping their heads toward the stars. Lala became an iconic character of Cuban theater and represents the soul, the landing point of the home. Lalita (Marian Mendez) is the dutiful daughter, who, overburdened with ballet, piano and language classes, would rather spend her days carefree listening to American rock ‘n’ roll and dreaming about boys. Anselmito is a painter at university who has embraced the exciting and new formless expressionist art, though his mother would rather he used his canvas for a portrait of his sister or a depiction of the *sagrado corazón* of Jesus. Freila Merencio is Fermina, the lonely and oversexed Prieto neighbor, who comes snooping often as the local gossip. Lala is trying to keep up with the Joneses: she’s talked Anselmo into buying a telephone, and now wants a refrigerator. Anselmo only gets a raise every few years, and a refrigerator would cost big money.

On the surface, *Contigo Pan y Cebolla* is a sitcom, but as the refrigerator becomes more and more the center of the Prieto home, the struggles of making ends meet rises to the surface. The refrigerator represents more than just status in the play, it’s an icon of the industrialized West, the promises of science and technology, saving for the future, convenience versus hardship, a false idol in the face of old saints. Since there is only one electrical outlet in the room, the cold and closed metal refrigerator with its loud annoying hum is in competition with the warm wooden radio, which brings in the news of the world, songs to dance and sing to, and stories (whether or true or invented) about life. Only one or the other can be plugged in. The playwright, Héctor Quintero Viera, worked in television and radio before he wrote this, his first play. The Prietos are caught in conflict, with no right choices, on how to make a more comfortable life. Knowing that Cuba is on the verge of revolution, *Contigo Pan y Cebolla* takes a look in a sophisticated and sometimes humorous way at the pressures on the average household. As Lala argues with Anselmo about how tight money is and where to spend it, you wish you could say: “Wait, something big is going to happen, and your life will never be the same.”

Astorga’s Anselmo is ever-patient, and for most the play quiet, in the face of Nuñez’s Lala, who can fire off a verbal artillery of debate that would shame the forensics students of Harvard Law School. Their acting seems as natural as water passing over a stone. Their chemistry is not electric like new lovers’, but the persevering and understanding bond of a pair who have grown together over a few decades.



The rituals must me maintained. Photo: Russell J Young

One of the show's finest choreographed scenes happens when Lala is trying to hide her family's mealtime from the nosy Fermina: she covers up the clanking of dishes by pretending to dust, and bursts into the refrain of *Quizas, Quizas, Quizas*. Merencio's Fermina is a seductive suggestion of the famous and sensual Charo, and while her antics are at times funny, her revealing clothes and made-up vixen like hair speaks of loneliness and desperation. Lala, with her classic beauty and more ladylike attire, is a bundle of nerves in the face of Fermina's knock upon the door, but in their moments of conversation Veronika Nuñez's acting flips on a dime to become a genteel mask of the ever good samaritan next door.

Just as the crust of bread is thick, the stage is lined with family portraits of different sizes and weights, like the real collections of domestic life. Keith Hazen-Diehm's scenic arrangement is a recreation of an old family home in La Habana: the handmade lace table cloth, the statuary of celebrated saints handed down through generations, the feminine and floral china that holds and honors daily meals.

Director Nelda Reyes has made a faithful presentation of Viera's play, down to the smallest of details. Vera is one of Cuba's most celebrated artists, and Milagro's production offers a rare opportunity to see a play that is rarely performed in the United States. The embargo has been lifted, and we can now hop on a plane from O'Hare straight to Cuba. If this isn't possible for your schedule or pocketbook, *Contigo Pan y Cebolla*, if you pretend just a little bit, can take you there for a couple of hours.

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Contigo Pan y Cebolla continues at Milagro Theatre through March 5. [Ticket and schedule information are here.](#)

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